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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the question: What is proper conduct for an internal evaluator? Selected ethical issues are examined, and strategies for responding effectively are proposed. Issues examined are: (1) pressure to downplay negative and emphasize positive findings; (2) reinforcement for nonthreatening evaluation activities; (3) greater interest in making the evaluation unit "visible" than in using evaluation results; and (4) access to privileged information and political inuendos. Next, several gamesmanship strategies for surviving as an internal evaluator are discussed including: (1) reciprocity of self-disclosure, (2) reciprocal favors, (3) establishing an internal support base, (4) maintaining external linkages, and (5) using effective communication skills. This paper has taken the position that evaluators should save head-to-head ethical conflicts for important issues. Day-to-day evaluation decisions should employ gamesmanship. By developing sensitivity to organizational dynamics, the savvy internal evaluator should be able to conduct both ethical and effective evaluations.
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WHEN TO "HOLD EM" AND WHEN TO "FOLD EM":
ETHICAL PROBLEMS OF INTERNAL EVALUATORS*

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You gotta know when to hold em,
Know when to fold em,
Know when to walk away,
Know when to run.
Don't count your money while you're sitting at the
table.
There is time enough for countin' when the dealing's
done.
(Kenny Rogers, copyright - EMI, United Artist
Liberty, 1979).

There was an internal evaluator who was director of evaluation in a large urban school district. Charged to conduct both formative and summative evaluation, the evaluator was quite productive. Direct access to the highest levels of policy decisions was granted to the evaluator which resulted in a wide span of control and respect within the district. The superintendent gave the evaluator special privileges such as more opportunities for professional development, greater discretion over the budget, and more freedom in designing activities than the typical staff member. When it came time to prepare a written report of evaluation results for an external funding source, the evaluator reported negative as well as positive results. A conflict arose when the superintendent wanted to tone down the

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negative findings. The evaluator fought to preserve the negative findings and won the battle. But subsequently the evaluator lost power in the district, was excluded from meetings, denied travel requests, and given low status assignments. What could this evaluator have done to resolve the conflict more effectively?

This brief scenario provides a backdrop for examining some of the ethical problems in the role of an internal evaluator. This paper addresses the question: What is proper conduct for an internal evaluator? Selected ethical issues are examined and strategies for responding effectively are proposed.

The internal motivation of a typical evaluator can be characterized as upholding "social consciousness" through providing objective and frank public information. Evaluators are inculcated to become altruistic, impartial defenders of truth. Most individuals performing evaluation roles receive strong reinforcement to uphold the public good through training and professional interaction. An example of such professional commitment is the "Proprietary Standards" for evaluation that emphasize "full and frank disclosure" and protecting "the public's right to know" (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1981). Because of a focus on the larger good, evaluators may be insensitive to the realities of organizational life. In fact, evaluators may view themselves as immune from mundane organizational rules.

The typical external milieu in which an evaluator works can be characterized as an organization protecting and advancing its mission. Organizations, are motivated by self-preservation.

Once a group of individuals become a collective structure, a shared goal is that of preserving and perpetuating the collective structure which has been instrumental in helping individuals to get what they want (Steiner 1955). Organizational norms reinforce conformity and loyalty. Routines, standard operating procedures, and "grooved thinking" (Steinbrunner 1974) work against the organization being able to discredit its prior performance. Organizations must continually give the impression that everything is going fine and that the organization knows what it is doing (Weick 1979). Strong organizations can and do re-interpret their histories to improve future performance. But there is an overall tendency for organizations to protect the status quo.

Ethical Issues

An evaluator's ethical values sometimes clash with the realities of organizational life. There is one primary ethical problem that an internal evaluator encounters: salary and continued employment are controlled by the organization. When an organization hires an evaluator and pays his or her salary, the organization expects the evaluator to work in its best interest. Korn (1982) feels the evaluator who is an employee of an organization faces constraints not faced by an outside evaluator due to organizational sanctions of salary control and continued employment. An organization does not want an evaluation to reflect negatively on its programs and operations. Any individual, especially one in a key management role, must be trusted by the organization to be functional.

Consequently, an internal evaluator is in a especially vulnerable position in balancing organizational loyalty and professional objectivity. Success often depends on the evaluator's capacity to convince an organization that evaluation is in their best interest.

The evaluator may encounter:

1. Pressure to downplay negative and emphasize positive findings
2. Reinforcement for non-threatening evaluation activities (e.g. record keeping and needs assessment)
3. Greater interest in making the evaluation unit "visible" than in using evaluation results
4. Access to privileged information and political inuendos.

This section examines each of these ethical issues in greater detail.

1. Pressure to downplay negative and emphasize positive findings. Organizations may expect an evaluator to put organizational loyalty and performance as a team player above providing a candid portrayal of the evaluation findings. The evaluation unit may be expected to perform a "public relations" function -- to promote and defend the organization rather than to view it impartially.

Depending on the situation, public relations can be a legitimate part of an internal evaluators' role. That is, an internal evaluator can apply methodological rigor to examining what an organization has done well. An internal evaluator must deal with negative findings, problems, and weaknesses but in many

cases this information may be most appropriately used for improvements internal to an organization rather than externally reported.

When should negative evaluation findings be reported externally? Smith's (1981) legal paradigm for determining the "level of certainty" necessary for informed decision-making provides one baseline for this decision. Smith as expanded by Morris and Sales (1982) suggest that decision-makers phrase their decisions in one of four levels of certainty: suggestive evidence (less than 51% certainty); preponderant evidence (between 51%-75%); clear and convincing proof (between 76%-89% certainty); and proof beyond a reasonable doubt (greater than 89% certainty). Negative findings probably should be reported when there is evidence of gross negligence or illegal activities or when the level of certainty of important findings is over 75%.

2. Reinforcement for non-threatening evaluation activities.

A subtler form of pressure to downplay negative findings is reinforcement for non-threatening evaluation. An organization may resist tackling evaluations that question basic assumptions or have the potential to reveal strong negative findings. For example, an organization may prefer to address the question "How can competency-based education be improved?" rather than "Does competency-based education promote or stifle critical thinking? An evaluator may find greater support for non-value laden evaluation activities such as maintaining statistical records on organizational outreach. An internal evaluator may gain freedom

to conduct more challenging studies by spending some time conducting mundane activities valued by the organization.

3. Greater interest in making the evaluation unit "visible" than in using evaluation results. Some organizations want the structure but not the substance of an evaluation unit. The presence of an evaluation unit to provide symbolic representation of objectivity, rigor, and quality assurance may be of special value to an organization that is in the public eye. Weiner, Rubin and Sachse (1977) suggest that one important use of evaluation is its "symbolic influence." Symbolic influence occurs when the existence of evaluation serves a ritual function, and its success is independent of the message the evaluation brings to decision makers. A savvy internal evaluator can transmute the need for symbolic influence by building an evaluation capacity that seeps into the fabric of an organization. An evaluation capacity can become increasingly vital to an organization over time through activities, such as: building evaluation systems that are designed to expand over time; assuring that some evaluation activities have shared ownership across the organization; maintaining external linkages for conducting some evaluation activities; and keeping evaluation visible through frequent articles, speeches, and other dissemination outlets.

4. Access to privileged information and political inuendos. This ethical issue differs from the above three in that it puts the internal evaluator at an advantage. By virtue of day-to-day closeness to the inner workings of an organization, an internal

evaluator comes to know an organization intimately. Even the most effective organization has its unique problems, such as ill-conceived projects, low performing staff, inefficient systems, interpersonal conflicts, and so on. An organization can become quite vulnerable to an internal evaluator's access to information. Certain information could be damaging to an organization's continued survival.

An internal evaluator needs to develop mutually agreed upon ground rules with the key decision maker for sharing information. Sieber and Sanders (1978) suggest negotiating formal agreements which specify allowable behavior of the evaluator and decision maker. For example, some information would only be shared internally, while some could be shared with external audiences. The reporting mode for some information may be exclusively through personal communication or confidential memo while other information would appear in formal reports.

The internal evaluator must serve both scientific inquiry and business world decisions. How much to render unto the organization or to the profession of evaluation remains the question. The unique role of the evaluator is providing reliable, valid, and objective information that is useful for making decisions.

To successfully manage the subtle and overt pressures that come with bridging scientific cannons and organizational realities, the internal evaluator needs to become a gamesman (Adams 1982). Evaluator gamesmanship is the subtle art of

protecting self, organizational, and professional interests without compromising ethical values. The remainder of this paper discusses several gamesmanship strategies for surviving as an internal evaluator. These strategies can be used to confront, prevent, or diffuse ethical conflicts in various situations. However, it is important to note that ultimately ethics comes down to a personal decision by the evaluator.

Evaluator Gamesmanship

The key rule for survival as an internal evaluator is knowing what issues are important enough to fight for. To demonstrate organizational loyalty, an internal evaluator must compromise or lose conflicts some of the time. As an internal evaluator "you gotta know when to hold em and know when to fold em" to maintain long term effectiveness within an organization. Several guidelines for evaluator gamesmanship are discussed below.

1. Reciprocity of self-disclosure. An organization is in a vulnerable position because the internal evaluator has access to confidential information. An internal evaluator needs to share vulnerability to build trust. For example, internal evaluators could make use of meta-evaluation (Stufflebeam 1974) to have their own work critiqued. Credible external consultants (preferably chosen by key internal decision makers) could be invited to critique evaluation designs and reports. The evaluator is then open to criticism and negative feedback as are others in the organization through evaluation.

2. Reciprocal favors. A decision-maker or other stakeholder may grant special privileges to an evaluator, such as opportunities for advancement. In some rare instances, someone may attempt to "buy off" an evaluator. More typically, offers of favors are subtle and even unconscious. In organizations, return is expected when favors have been granted. An internal evaluator needs to be sensitive to offers of favors and not accept them unless reciprocal favors can be granted appropriately. On the other hand, an evaluator also has access to powerful favors. The "you pat my back - I'll pay yours" approach may conjure up negative connotations of political deal making. Yet reciprocal favors, when used with discretion, can be important in evaluations with high stakes and key stakeholders. For example, an internal evaluator can:

- play up legitimate positive evaluation results to gain advocates

- give others power and visibility through evaluation data

- prepare individualized reports to relieve administrative burden or meet a specific need of others.

3. Establishing an internal support base. An internal evaluator has access to various incentives and disincentives for affecting the behavior of others. Typically, an internal evaluator has a designated position of power, as well as information, expertise and resources to dispense. These sources of power can be used to build an internal support base (Lotto 1981).

An internal evaluator often can avoid ethical conflicts by working through others. Pressure can be diffused on sensitive

issues by incorporating values of opinion leaders in the evaluation design, to gain their interest and support. Once various internal staff have a vested interest in the evaluation, they may be willing to defend the evaluation and fight battles to preserve probing questions and negative findings. Diffusing responsibility for evaluation mitigates against an "us-them" relationship between an internal evaluator and an organization (Adams and Walker 1977). Krathwohl (1980) applies the labor negotiations concept of "integrative bargaining" to program evaluation. This technique is used to find common or complementary interests and solve problems confronting both parties.

4. Maintaining external linkages. An internal evaluator needs to maintain strong professional linkages in both the evaluation field and substantive field of the organization. External credibility can enhance an evaluator's internal influence and respect within an organization. External linkages include: maintaining personal/professional friendships; using external consultants; bringing in external funding; publishing articles and books; and presenting papers to the professional community. For longevity, an evaluator can play both sides of the coin (internal and external). Strong external linkages appear to give the evaluator greater internal control over evaluation functions.

5. Using effective communication skills. Recent evaluation literature describes excellent strategies for communicating evaluation results (Davis and Salasian 1975; Patton 1978; Alkin,

Daillak and White 1979; Holley 1979; Braskamp and Brown 1980; Dickey 1980; Thompson 1981; Franchak, 1981; Smith 1982).

Effective communication of evaluation findings can reduce ethical problems by mitigating against misconceptions, ambiguity and surprises. For example, the evaluator should share findings incrementally and informally so that negative findings are not surprising. The evaluator should empathize with the decision-makers world which is characterized by brevity, variety, and fragmentation. Findings can be tied to specific issues of interest to decision-makers (Cox 1977).

Summary

Let's return to the scenario at the beginning of the paper, and re-examine the ethical conflict. On the positive side, the evaluator in the scenario appears to have competence, integrity, respect, access to the key decision-maker, and freedom in design. On the negative side, the evaluator appears to be somewhat naive of the decision-maker's values and motivation, lacks compatible expectations for the purpose of the evaluation; and seems unwilling to compromise.

This evaluator could have strengthened his or her effectiveness by:

- o Clarifying and testing reporting relationships for the evaluation before a conflict arose
- o accepting public relations as one legitimate function of an internal evaluator
- o using external support, such as consultants to add credibility to findings

- o sharing negative findings personally with the superintendent before they appeared in a report
- o letting others fight to protect the negative findings.

This paper has taken the position that evaluators should save head-to-head ethical conflicts for important issues. Day-to-day evaluation decisions should employ gamesmanship. By developing sensitivity to organizational dynamics, the savvy internal evaluator should be able to conduct both ethical and effective evaluations. There will be dialectics of performance between evaluators and organizations that coexist rather than get resolved. In responding to the dialectical tension between organizational pragmatism and professional ethics, the evaluator gamesman must decide when to hold em, when to fold em, and when to change the game.

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